

“Through The Tunnel”

Doris Lessing

The first day of vacation, going to the shore, the young English boy stopped at a turning of the path and looked down at a wild and rocky bay, and then over the crowded beach he knew so well from other years. His mother walked in front, carrying a bright striped bag in one hand. Her other arm, swinging loose, white in the sun. The child watched his mum and turned away towards the bay. He looks at this foretaste of adventure, then returns to his mother. When she felt he was not with her, she swung around. “Oh, there you are, Jerry!” she said. She looked impatient, then smiled. “Why, darling, would you rather not come with me? Would you rather ” She frowned, conscientiously worrying over what amusements he might secretly be longing for, which she had been too busy or too careless to imagine. He was very familiar with that anxious, apologetic smile. Feeling a sense of guilt, he hurried to catch up with her. Yet, even as he ran, he glanced back at the wild bay. And for the rest of the morning, while he played on the familiar, safe beach, his thoughts kept drifting back to the untamed bay.

The next morning, when it was time for the routine of swimming and sunbathing, his mother said, “Are you tired of the usual beach, Jerry? Would you like to go somewhere else?” Oh Oh, no!” he said quickly, smiling at her out of that unfailing impulse of contrition a sort of chivalry. Yet, walking down the path with her, he blurted out, “I’d like to go and have a look at those rocks down there.”

She gave the idea her attention. She said, “Of course, Jerry. When you’ve had enough, come to the big beach. Or just go straight back to the villa, if you like.” She walked away, that bare arm, now slightly reddened from yesterday’s sun, swinging. And he almost ran after her again, feeling it unbearable that she should go by herself, but he did not.

She thought, Of course, he’s old enough to be safe without me. Have I been keeping him too close? He mustn’t feel he ought to be with me. I must be careful.

He was an only child, eleven years old. She was a widow. She was determined to be neither possessive nor lacking in devotion. She went worrying off to her beach.

From where he was, high up among red-brown rocks, it was a scoop of moving bluish green fringed with white. As he went lower, he saw that spread among small promontories and inlets of rough, sharp rock, and the crisping, lapping surface showed stains of purple and darker blue.

He sprinted down, seeing the ocean, a thing of deep blues and white tufts.

He ran straight into the water and began swimming. He was a good swimmer. He went out fast over the gleaming sand, over a middle region where rocks lay like discoloured monsters under the surface, and then he was in the real sea — a warm sea where irregular cold currents from the deep water shocked his limbs.

When he was so far out that he could look back not only on the little bay but past the promontory that was between it and the big beach, he floated on the buoyant surface and looked for his mother. There she was, a speck of yellow under an umbrella that looked like a slice of orange peel. He swam back to the shore, relieved at being sure she was there, but all at once lonely.

On the edge of a small cape that marked the side of the bay away from the promontory was a loose scatter of rocks. Above them, some boys were stripping off their clothes. They came running,

naked, down to the rocks. The English boy swam toward them but kept his distance at a stone's throw. They were off that coast; all of them were burned smooth dark brown and speaking a language he did not understand. To be with them, of them, was a craving that filled his whole body. He swam a little closer; they turned and watched him with narrowed alert dark eyes. Then one smiled and waved. It was enough. In a minute, he had swum in and was on the rocks beside them, smiling with a desperate, nervous supplication. They shouted cheerful greetings at him; and then, as he preserved his nervous, uncomprehending smile, they understood that he was a foreigner strayed from his own beach, and they proceeded to forget him. But he was happy. He was with them.

They began diving again and again from a high point into a well of blue sea between rough, pointed rocks. They were big boys — men, to Jerry. He dived, and they watched him; and when he swam around to take his place, they made way for him. He felt he was accepted and he dived again, carefully, proud of himself. One of the bigger children jumped in under the gaze of the other children. The boy took a while to break the surface of the water but eventually did, taking immense breath after immense breath. Immediately the rest of them dived in. One moment, the morning seemed full of chattering boys; the next, the air and surface of the water were empty.

Jerry dived, shot past the school of underwater swimmers, saw a black wall of rock looming at him, touched it, and bobbed up at once to the surface, where the wall was a low barrier he could see across. There was no one visible; under him, in the water, the dim shapes of the swimmers had disappeared. Then one, and then another of the boys came up on the far side of the barrier of rock, and he understood that they had swum through some gap or hole in it. He plunged again. He could see nothing through the stinging salt water but the blank rock. When he came up the boys

were all on the diving rock, preparing to attempt the feat again. And now, in a panic of failure, he yelled up, in English, "Look at me! Look!" and he began splashing and kicking in the water like a foolish dog.

They looked down gravely, frowning. He knew the frown. At moments of failure, when he clowned to claim his mother's attention, it was with just this grave, embarrassed inspection that she rewarded him.

Water surged into his mouth; he choked, sank, came up. The rock, lately weighted with boys, seemed to rear up out of the water as their weight was removed. They were flying down past him, now, into the water; the air was full of falling bodies. Then the rock was empty in the hot sunlight. He counted one, two, three...

At fifty, he was terrified. They must all be drowning beneath him, in the watery caves of the rock! At a hundred, he stared around him at the empty hillside, wondering if he should yell for help. He counted faster, faster, to hurry them up, to bring them to the surface quickly, to drown them quickly, anything rather than the terror of counting on and on into the blue emptiness of the morning. And then, at a hundred and sixty, the water beyond the rock was full of boys blowing like brown whales. They swam back to the shore without a look at him.

He felt the stone under his feet as he climbed back onto it. The children had already gotten farther down the shore. They had abandoned him. Angry, he wept profusely.

It seemed to him that a long time has passed, and he swam out to where he could see his mother. Yes, she was still there, a yellow spot under an orange umbrella. He swam back to the big rock, climbed up, and dived into the blue pool among the fanged and angry boulders. Down he went until he touched the wall of the rock again. But the salt was so painful in his eyes that he could not see.

He came to the surface, swam to shore and went back to the villa to wait for his mother. Soon she walked slowly up the path, swinging her striped bag, the flushed, naked arm dangling beside her. "I want some swimming goggles," he panted, defiant and beseeching.

She gave him a patient, inquisitive look as she said casually, "Well, of course, darling."

But now, now, now! He must have them this minute, and no other time. The goggles were soon bought and Jerry was back at the villa. Jerry swam out to the big barrier rock, adjusted the goggles, and dived. The impact of the water broke the runner-enclosed vacuum, and the goggles came loose. He understood that he must swim down to the base of the rock from the surface of the water. He fixed the goggles tight and firm, filled his lungs, and floated, face down, on the water. Now, he could see. It was as if he had eyes of a different kind — fish eyes that showed everything clear and delicate and wavering in the bright water. Under him, six or seven feet down, was a floor of perfectly clean, shining white sand, rippled firm and hard by the tides. Two grayish shapes steered there, like long, rounded pieces of wood or slate. They were fish. He saw them nose toward each other, poise motionless, make a dart forward, swerve off, and come around again. It was like a water dance. Fish again — myriads of minute fish, the length of his fingernail, were drifting through the water, and in a moment he could feel the innumerable tiny touches of them against his limbs. It was like swimming in flaked silver. The great rock the big boys had swum through rose sheer out of the white sand — black, tufted lightly with greenish weed. He could see no gap in it. He swam down to its base.

Again and again, he rose, took a big chestful of air, and went down. Again and again, he groped over the surface of the rock, feeling it, almost hugging it in the desperate need to find the

entrance. He felt his feet suddenly touch nothing, he had found the hole.

He gained the surface, clambered about the stones that littered the barrier rock until he found a big one, and, with this in his arms, let himself down over the side of the rock. He dropped, with the weight, straight to the sandy floor. Clinging tight to the anchor of stone, he lay on his side and looked in under the dark shelf at the place where his feet had gone. He could see the hole. It was an irregular, dark gap; but he could not see deep into it. He let go of his anchor, clung with his hands to the edges of the holes, and tried to push himself in.

He had got his head in, found his shoulders jammed, moved them in sidewise, and was inside as far as his waist. He could see nothing ahead. Something soft and clammy touched his mouth; he saw a dark frond moving against the grayish rock, and panic filled him. He thought of octopi, of sirens, of sharks. He pushed himself out backward and caught a glimpse, as he retreated, of a harmless tentacle of seaweed drifting in the mouth of the tunnel. But it was enough. He reached the sunlight, swam to the shore, and lay on the diving rock. He looked down into the blue well of water. He knew he must find his way through that cave, or hole, or tunnel, and out the other side.

First, he thought, he must learn to control his breathing. He let himself down into the water with another big stone in his arms, so that he could lie effortlessly on the bottom of the sea. He counted. One, two, three. He counted steadily. He could hear the movement of blood in his chest. Fiftyone, fiftytwo... His chest was hurting. He let go of the rock and went up into the air. He saw that the sun was low. He rushed to the villa and found his mother at her supper. She said only "Did you enjoy yourself?" and he said "Yes."

Every night, the boy dreamed of the water-filled cave in the rock, and as soon as breakfast was over he went to the bay.

That night, his nose bled badly. For hours he had been underwater, learning to hold his breath, and now he felt weak and dizzy. His mother said, "I shouldn't overdo things, darling, if I were you."

That day and the next, Jerry exercised his lungs as if everything, the whole of his life, all that he could become, depended upon it. Again his nose bled at night, and his mother insisted on his coming with her the next day. It was a torment to him to waste a day of his careful training, but he stayed with her on that other beach, which now seemed a place for small children, a place where his mother might lie safe in the sun. It was not his beach. He did not ask for permission, on the following day, to go to his beach. He went before his mother could consider the complicated rights and wrongs of the matter. A day's rest, he discovered, had improved his count by ten. The big boys had made the passage while he counted a hundred and sixty. He could very well be wrong. He recalls that during his counting he was very scared. He doubted that he could successfully pass under the tunnel now. Driven by an unusual, almost adult-like determination and a quiet impatience, he waited. In the meantime, he lay submerged on the white sand, now scattered with stones he had brought down from above, carefully examining the tunnel's entrance. He had memorized every nook and cranny he could see. It was as though he could already feel its sharp edges pressing against his shoulders.

When his mother wasn't around, he sat by the clock in the villa and timed himself. He was happy that he was able to increase his breathing time to two minutes without causing himself pain.

In another four days, his mother said casually one morning, they must go home. On the day before they left, he would do it. He would do it if it killed him, he said defiantly to himself. But two days before they were to leave — a day of triumph when he

increased his count by fifteen — his nose bled so badly that he turned dizzy and had to lie limply over the big rock like a bit of seaweed, watching the thick red blood flow on to the rock and trickle slowly down to the sea. He was frightened. Supposing he turned dizzy in the tunnel? Supposing he died there, trapped? Supposing — his head went around, in the hot sun, and he almost gave up. He thought he would turn to the house and lie down, and next summer, perhaps, when he had another year's growth in him — then he would go through the hole.

After setting his mind to it, he sat on the rock, unmoving, staring down into the water. His nose was now fine. He kept talking to himself, this is it, it's now, the moment is now. He couldn't back out now, the idea alone scared him. At the same time, he was filled with dread, thinking of that long, dark tunnel beneath the rock, under the sea. Even in the bright sunlight, the rock seemed impossibly wide and heavy, like tons of stone pressing down on the place he intended to go. If he died down there, his body might lie trapped until, maybe next year, those older boys swam in and found the tunnel blocked. He tested the suction on the goggles, grabbed a stone, jumped into the ocean and sank to the sand. He let it go and began to count. He took the edges of the hole in his hands and drew himself into it, wriggling his shoulders in sidewise as he remembered he must, kicking himself along with his feet.

Soon he was clear inside. He seemed to be in a pocket of water. The water was pushing him up against the roof. The roof was sharp and pained his back. He pulled himself along with his hands fast, fast and used his legs like levers. His head knocked against something; a sharp pain dizzied him. Fifty, fiftyone, fifty two... He was without light, and the water seemed to press upon him with the weight of the rock. Seventyone, seventytwo... There was no strain on his lungs. He felt like an inflated balloon, his lungs were so light and easy, but his head was pulsing.

He was being continually pressed against the sharp roof, which felt slimy as well as sharp. Again he thought of octopi. He kicked and swam, groped at this and kicked at that, he was stressed. His feet and hands moved freely, as if on open water. The hole must have widened out. He thought he must be swimming fast, and he was frightened of banging his head if the tunnel narrowed.

A hundred, a hundred and one... The water paled. A few more strokes and he would be out. He was counting wildly; he said a hundred and fifteen, and then a long time later, a hundred and fifteen again. The water was dark and green and all around him. Then he saw, above his head, a crack running up through the rock. Sunlight was falling through it, showing the clean, dark rock of the tunnel, a single mussel shell, and darkness ahead.

He couldn't go on any further, it was impossible. A hundred and fifteen, he had said that before, a long time ago, he started thinking. He must go on into the blackness ahead, or he would drown. His head was swelling, his lungs cracking. A hundred and fifteen, a hundred and fifteen pounded through his head, and he feebly clutched at rocks in the dark, pulling himself forward, leaving the brief space of sunlit water behind. He passed out. He was gone, slipping in and out of consciousness. He pulled himself forward. Eventually, his hands held onto nothing, his feet sent him into open waters.

He surfaced, his face pointed up towards the sky. For a moment, he was sure he'd die. He barely found it in himself to swim towards a rock he had seen. But then, he reached found it, and he heaved himself onto it, he lay on the rock, panting, with a pale face. His nose was bleeding. He took his goggles off, there was blood everywhere.

He splashed his face with seawater, cleaning himself. Eventually, he calmed down, the bleeding stopped and he sat upright. In the distance, he saw the boys diving into the water,

surprising himself, he didn't feel like joining them. All he wanted was to get home.

Before long, Jerry swam back to shore, climbing the path to the villa at a sluggish pace. He threw himself onto his bed and fell asleep, waking only when he heard footsteps outside. His mother was coming back. Frightened, he ran to the washroom to wash the blood that had gotten everywhere. When he emerged, she had just walked into the villa, smiling, her eyes filled with warmth and light.

"Have a nice morning?" she asked, laying her hand on his warm brown shoulder.

"Oh, yes, thank you,"

"How did you bang your head?"

"Oh, just banged it," he told her.

She looked at him closely. He was strained; his eyes were glazed looking. She was worried. And then she said to herself, Oh, don't fuss! Nothing can happen. He can swim like a fish.

They sat down to lunch together.

"Mummy," he said, "I can stay underwater for two minutes — three minutes, at least... It came bursting out of him.

"Can you, darling?" she said. "Well, I shouldn't overdo it. I don't think you ought to swim anymore today."